

# OG Attempts the English Channel

A 57 year-old man decides to swim the English Channel solo. This is the log of the attempt.

## Death in the Bay

Saturday 01/23/10



To the best of my knowledge, Jim Small is the only person to die swimming in San Francisco Bay. Like many large bodies of water, the Bay has its share of drownings, murders, and suicides. Mr. Small was not one of these. He was an excellent swimmer. He was not eaten by a shark nor did he succumb to hypothermia. In October of 1963, he was run over by a fishing boat.

He was twenty-seven years old when he died, a strapping young man over six feet tall weighing 185 pounds. James Baird, the man who swam stroke for stroke with Jim Small the day of the tragedy, said, "We were water babies. We swam, played water polo, surfed, were lifeguards." A month earlier, Mr. Baird had barely edged out a victory in the annual Dolphin Club Golden Gate swim. According to Art Rosenbaum's column in the San Francisco Chronicle, Baird turned to his best friend after the race and gasped, "I was lucky—you're the best swimmer." Small replied, "Luck had nothing to do with it—you made the course. You deserved it."

The setting for the disaster was a long open water race in San Francisco Bay sponsored by the Dolphin Club. The course ran from Richardson Bay, across the shipping lane to a buoy moored near the St. Francis Yacht Club, and then turned east to end at the club beach in Aquatic Park. Given the distance and potential boat traffic, the organizers required a pilot craft for each swimmer. Come race day, though, ten swimmers showed up with eight pilot boats. Because Mr. Small and Mr. Baird were so evenly matched in speed, it seemed reasonable to allocate one support boat for both swimmers. Inauspiciously, another contestant arrived at the last minute and begged to swim. The organizers knew Joe Flahaven as a strong, fast swimmer and made a scrimmage-line call to allow him to participate. That made the count eleven swimmers, eight pilot craft.

Nowadays, it's not unusual to have as many as three swimmers per

## Aquatic Park



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### ▼ 2010 (33)

- ▶ October (1)
- ▶ September (7)
- ▶ August (1)
- ▶ July (2)
- ▶ June (2)
- ▶ May (4)
- ▶ April (2)
- ▶ March (4)
- ▶ February (4)

### ▼ January (6)

[Three Hour Swim](#)

[Death in the Bay](#)

[Consummated Sunriser](#)

[Why Are You Doing This?](#)

[NYD Alcatraz](#)

[Matthew Webb](#)

### ▶ 2009 (19)

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San Francisco, CA

pilot boat. One difference is that modern swims are covered with one or more motorized vessels. Typically these are fast, inflatable boats that zoom around the periphery of the swimmers, creating a safety zone. These zippy boats are easily capable of intercepting anything that poses a threat other than the large tanker and container ships. As they do in the English Channel, these behemoths have the right of way over swimmers. Prior to 1961, the Coast Guard provided patrol boats to support Bay swims. In July of that year, the newly appointed Rear Admiral Allen Winbeck rescinded that policy. For the fateful race, human-powered, hand-built wooden row boats provided the sole protection.

Another difference is that this swim pre-dated the formation of the San Francisco Vessel Traffic Service or [VTS](#). Established in 1972, nine years after the death of Jim Small, the VTS is located on Yerba Buena Island in the San Francisco Bay. Its responsibility is to monitor and control shipping traffic much the same way that Air Traffic Control monitors and controls air traffic.

A third difference is that pilots of out-of-cove swims for both clubs now employ modern marine communication equipment. With these hi-tech "walkie-talkies," they contact VTS at the beginning of a swim and provide swimmer count, origin, destination, and approximate finish time. VTS closely regulates container ship movement, so pilots have very early warning of the approach of large vessel traffic. Using separate marine channels, pilots can also directly communicate with other Bay traffic as well as with other pilots. This technology was prohibitively expensive and bulky at the time.

On race day, Dan Osborne and Dave Hinton were the oarsmen in the double-seated rowboat assigned to cover the two lead swimmers, Mr. Small and Mr. Baird. A champion swimmer himself, Mr. Osborne was an extremely experienced open water pilot. As Mr. Flahaven had no personal pilot and was fairly fast, the plan was for the one rowboat to provide support for all three swimmers. Unfortunately, by the time the group was halfway across the Bay, Mr. Flahaven had fallen a hundred yards behind the leaders. Mr. Osborne and Mr. Hinton split their attention fore and aft until the fateful moment that they spotted the conning tower of a U.S. Navy nuclear submarine steaming east in the deeper channel north of Alcatraz. Black and stealthy, numerous submarines plied San Francisco Bay in the days before the Mare Island [submarine base](#) closed in 1996. The nearly submerged ship appeared to be headed toward the trailing swimmer. The pilots assayed the scene and saw no threat for the two leaders, so they decided to drop back.

Just as the pilots found themselves the farthest from the two leaders, Glen Newmann, captain of the sport-fishing boat, Pacific Dawn, decided to try and improve his luck. The fishers pulled their lines and Captain Newmann steamed at top speed along the [Alcatraz Shoal](#), cutting right across the lead swimmers' path.

I joined the Dolphin Club in the fall of 1989. It has made my life richer beyond measure. When taken as a whole with the South End Rowing Club, no place on earth can compare for eclectic membership and fascinating stories. As the captive audience of each other while we slowly warm up in the sauna, we are treated to myriad "sauna true facts." Some facts are even true. A few of them, true or otherwise, are related here.

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Brian Gilbert, a lifetime member of the Dolphin Club, has written the most well-penned and well-researched account of this calamity available. Published in the Spring 2002 issue of the Dolphin Log, Mr. Gilbert's article draws on extensive interviews with the eye witnesses. With permission, I will quote liberally from Mr. Gilbert's account:

'Dan Osborne: "When we saw the threat, we turned around and went back to Baird and Small at our best speed. When we realized we couldn't reach them in time, we stood up in the boat and shouted and waved our arms, trying to draw attention. The captain was lounging in the cabin and he just waved back, apparently thinking we were just being overly friendly. He never altered course or looked at where we were pointing."

Glenn Newmann: "I heard a thump and I thought we'd hit a piece of driftwood. Then I saw that head with goggles bob up, and I thought, 'Oh my God, we've hit a skin diver.'"

James Baird: "I looked up and saw the thing five feet away. I saw it coming because I breathe on the left side. I pushed myself away from the hull and just missed getting hit by the propeller."

Dan Osborne: "It was terrible. When I first saw the area, there was a circle of blood in the water 30 feet across. Somehow I got hold of his arms and tried to lift him up and into the boat, but I found I just couldn't do it. Dave couldn't help me because he had all he could do to keep the boat from capsizing with me trying to lift an unconscious man, slippery with his own blood, up over the gunwale. I cracked two ribs in the attempt, but I just couldn't do it. We retrieved his severed leg, but that's about all we could do for him."

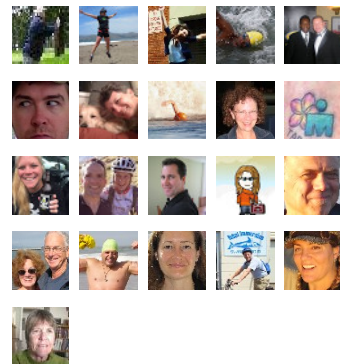
Philip Christiana, captain of the Sea Raven: "We could see that boat cutting right across the swimmer's path. We could all see it was going to happen, but it was too late for us to do anything. When we reached the rowboat, we all helped to get the swimmer on board and laid him on the hatch cover."

Rushed to Letterman Hospital in the Presidio, Jim Small survived for three days. Hospital doctors told Art Rosenbaum that only Mr. Small's remarkable physique and stamina kept him alive through the many surgeries and the amputation of his other leg.

One of the hand-built boats belonging to the Dolphin Club is named in Jim Small's honor. His picture occupies a prominent position in the Staib Room. His cautionary tale has led to numerous additional safety precautions and provides ample incentive to exercise vigilance swimming outside Aquatic Park.

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